
Six Stories of Social Innovation in Quebec

This is the final installment [in our series](#) about social innovation. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and McConnell Foundation.

Like any ecosystem worthy of the name, social innovation in Quebec is rich and diverse. This article offers a glimpse into six organizations that have developed new models that bring hope to those working in the sector.

Maison de l'innovation sociale

When you talk with the team at the [Maison de l'innovation sociale \(MIS\)](#), the expression “valley of the dead” often comes up. This is the crucial growth phase of a social enterprise, between its initial financing and the time when it generates enough revenue to survive. It is the stage of a project's life cycle to which MIS dedicates much of its efforts and programs, and which fulfils its mission to promote the emergence of social innovations and create optimal conditions for promising and uncommon collaborations.

“Unlike other models that primarily focus on acceleration or scaling up social innovation projects, MIS gets involved very early and builds the first bridges on their journey,” explains Violaine Des Rosiers, co-executive director at MIS. “This is an asset for foundations and impact investors, who see in MIS programs a way to de-risk their investments upstream and develop new financial products with social and environmental returns, while building the capacities of their beneficiaries.”

The MIS launched its first activities last year. It was born from a partnership between major stakeholders in Quebec's social innovation ecosystem — the Fondation Mirella et Lino Saputo and the McConnell Foundation, which are its main donors, as well as Esplanade, HEC Montréal, Concordia University and the CIRODD research institute. Despite being so young, it is already becoming an internationally recognized organization.

MIS is currently focusing on four programs: Incubateur civique, an incubator that promotes prototyping and maturing ideas for social and environmental impact projects; Innovateurs sociaux en résidence, a residency program that immerses teams of social innovators in local development organizations, public institutions, and businesses; Tangram, a free digital platform for social innovators and aspiring social entrepreneurs; and Villes d'avenir, a program that welcomes social research and development activities in urban centres.

MIS also produces *Raccords*, a free digital newsletter that it publishes every two months, filled with content on various social innovation topics.

“MIS' activities are complementary,” says Patrick Dubé, co-executive director. “Its specificity is in its desire to reveal the potential synergy between the unusual suspects and the ecosystem to boost the expected positive impact.” By connecting project leaders to various ecosystem stakeholders and levers, and by better capturing ideas that target both social and environmental impact, MIS has the ambition to establish itself as a structuring link in Quebec's chain of social

innovation.

Fillactive

[Fillactive](#) quite literally started out as an accident. At age 22, elite cyclist Claudine Labelle was struck by a car during training and sustained a severe head injury. She had to give up her dreams of becoming an Olympian. Forced to rethink her entire existence, she chose to focus on raising girls' awareness about the benefits of physical activity.

In the first years, Labelle's mission led her to speak at school conferences. Though she was successful, she recognized a greater need. School sports were simply not adapted for girls, leading one in two to drop out of sports during puberty. This gave rise to the first Fillactive program.

Today, more than 10 years later, "Fillactive is positioned as a complete, flexible offer" to help schools keep their students active, explains Marie-Claude Gauthier-Fredette, the organization's head of marketing and communication. "We are there to equip them."

Activities take place primarily in an extracurricular setting, during lunch and at the end of the day. With impressive results. The organization estimates that, during the past year alone, 285 schools in Quebec and Ontario have partnered with Fillactive to get more than 12,000 young women moving.

The organization has developed solid tools to attract corporate donations, which are now its primary source of revenue. This is rounded out with school contributions and government support.

"We have really been growing," says Gauthier-Fredette, noting the program also has indirect benefits, such as increased feelings of belonging at school. "We are getting girls to be active for life."

La Cantine pour tous

You may be surprised to learn that Canada is the only G7 member that does not have a universal school lunch program. Meanwhile, one in six children does not get enough nutritious food, according to UNICEF. While some provinces have initiatives to address this issue, their effectiveness is inconsistent.

At the other end of life, the number of senior citizens continues to rise, putting increasing pressure on social services. They too experience great disparity in the availability and quality of food. "Food doesn't seem to be a government priority in Canada," says Valérie Lafontaine, development officer for [La Cantine pour tous](#).

The organization decided to tackle this issue. The result of a collective that was founded in 2010, the social economy project brings together a group of organizations that are already involved in food security: popular restaurants, collective kitchens, community centres, and non-profits that distribute meals and snacks to schools, senior centres, and job integration companies, among others.

La Cantine pour tous' actions — and impact — are based on the principle of mutualization. The idea is to pool the resources of member organizations, which are complementary and rarely used to their full potential. For example, an organization that has a delivery truck but only uses it a few hours a day could rent it out to other organizations. The owners of the truck receive additional revenues that they can then reinvest in their mission, and the renters can expand their services. It's a win-win situation. The same concept can be applied to the use of kitchens, equipment and storage spaces.

La Cantine pour tous connects these various stakeholders, and their resources. As an intermediary, it works with organizations to expand the clientele they serve, thereby increasing their impact on the population's food security. "There is a real advantage for organizations to join us," says Lafontaine.

La Cantine has just launched a meal program that it offers in primary schools in a range of socioeconomic settings, allowing parents to pay what they can. The model is ready to be scaled out to other Canadian provinces.

Changing the world with real estate: Le Monastère des Augustines, Maison Mère, and Bâtiment 7

Social real estate developments are a growing trend throughout Canada. Quebec is home to several organizations that, each in their own way, are developing innovative projects. These are three such organizations.

Religious communities were among the first to support community life in modern Quebec. From the time of New France up to the 1960s, they were in charge of social services such as health care and education. But with interest in religion declining among Quebecers, today, many groups are attempting to offer a new legacy to the people of Quebec.

Such is the case of the Augustines of the Mercy of Jesus. In 1639, they established the first hospital north of Mexico, in Quebec City. Over the next three centuries, they would open 11 others in French-speaking Canada. But in the early 2000s, faced with a considerable decline in congregants, the sisters decided to offer contemporary, secular services to the public in their convent and 12 others, in pursuit of their mission to heal bodies and minds. Thus was founded the organization [Le Monastère des Augustines](#), a centre for renewal and wellness.

"Our project is the only one of its kind," says Isabelle Houde, head of communications, engagement, and social innovation. The organization opened four years ago and offers accommodation, a restaurant, an archive centre and museum reserve, a holistic health and cultural activities program (yoga, retreats, meditation, conferences, workshops, etc.), and a range of massage therapy and relaxation treatments, as well as event room rentals for companies and organizations, respite stays for caregivers, and renewal for health and social services workers.

This is all offered in the heritage building, which is located in the core of Vieux-Québec and has a long history as a place of care. "There is something special about that place," says Houde. "People feel good and relaxed as soon as they step foot through the door."

With a mix of revenue-generating activities, fundraisers, and grants, the organization is self-

sustaining. The Augustines are thrilled. The dream they have held since the start of the century has come true.

A similar problem was being tackled elsewhere during the same period, in another community and another city. In Baie-Saint-Paul, in the Charlevoix region, the congregation of the Petites Franciscaines de Marie decided to give up its large property — a 16,000-square metre building and three hectares of land, equal to 18 football fields — to start an inspiring project. In 2017, the municipality, hoping to prevent the enormous building from becoming an empty space in the downtown core, purchased the treasured heritage site.

After consultations that spanned several months and involved more than 90 contributors, stakeholders drew up a project that would soon become the driver of the region's economic development. They named the former convent [Maison Mère](#) (mother house), a name chosen via a public contest and a nod to its former occupants and its future ambitions. The firm of Pierre Thibault, a renowned Quebec architect, was picked to modernize the heritage building while preserving its character-defining elements.

Working with some of the region's top talent, creating new opportunities, and focusing on complementarity and the spirit of cooperation — these are the pillars upon which the Maison Mère team chose to rely, with an emphasis on youth. The building now houses 13 organizations whose missions align with at least one of six major themes: agri-food, culture, education, entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and housing. Residents include a continuing education organization, an environmental consultation group, a co-op café, a co-working space, a bakery, and a youth hostel. There is also a museum and rooms available to rent.

All of this creates “great synergy between these organizations housed under one roof,” says Gabrielle Leblanc, executive director of Maison Mère, highlighting that these organizations and facilities already employ 82 people. As the third year of operation kicks off, Leblanc is excited about what is to come. “It's going well, even if the challenge remains great. We are in line with our mission and able to bring together the different strengths of our community.”

Another type of heritage — industrial — also needs preserving.

That's the bet made by [Bâtiment 7](#), a self-managed organization that underwent a long grassroots battle to take back a former Canadian National building located in the working-class district of Pointe-Saint-Charles, in southwest Montreal. That battle began in the early 2000s and only ended in 2017, when the immense building coveted by real estate developers in the gentrifying area was transferred to Bâtiment 7. Its goal: to offer everyone, particularly the neighbourhood's marginalized populations, access to services, space for production, and places to gather, which are all sorely lacking.

Since then, 17 projects have been set up in the building. It now boasts a grocery store, an art school, and a metal workshop, to name a few. Cooperation and self-management are core principles of the initiative – and coordinator Judith Cayer says these do not always go so smoothly. “This is the only self-management structure with 200 people in Quebec,” she says. “We invented our own structure, taking inspiration from what has been done in other places, but adapting it to our reality.” The team has since consolidated various projects and secured grants to keep the organization running. The grocery store alone is a huge success, providing fresh, quality products to a population that has long been deprived of them.

The model is already attracting the attention of other social innovators. “We get three or four requests to visit a week, and we even have to turn some down,” explains the coordinator, noting that researchers from Simon Fraser University recently visited.

And this is all while the organization remains in the first of three planned development phases. Major projects are in the works, including an early childhood daycare centre and a small farm. “There is still so much to do,” says Cayer.